

I walked up the stairs with the Luis and Janet as murmurs of 'Jung-Suh viene!' filter through the hall. All the kids at the high school call me 'Jung-Suh' because of my striking resemblance to a beautiful actress from the Korean soap opera, "Stairway to Heaven." Korean soap operas give South American soaps a run for their money in this country! I'm flattered that while I cannot not say my own name in Spanish without it being confused as "Marlen" the kids find it fitting to name me either way. The shortage of Asians in this part of the world causes Korean soaps to dominate popular conceptions of Asians.

Strange misconceptions I've come across are ones like "Senorita, you are Japanese. And so even if you marry one of our people, your babies will come out Japanese. Japanese genes are so dominant, they overcome our Peruvian genes." I looked at the director of the high school in disbelief that someone could be this misled, and told him that I could show him a photo of my biracial cousins who were beautifully Taiwanese and white -- and not in the least, Japanese. Another time, there was a forestry engineer that works in the region, who told my host mom, "Dile a la chinita que me lleve a Japan!" Married man with a girlfriend, mind you, wants me to take him to Japan when I return to 'my land.' I'm learning more and more not to take offense to the blanket racial labels placed on me. I can't possibly change everyone's perception. At some point, miseducation plays a significant role in how the people see the world. After all, most people here believe that China, Korea and Japan are the same country.

When Luis, the dentist, stopped by my place on his way to the high school, Luis asked me, "Te gustan los bebés?" I shrugged, "I like to play with kids and then return them to their parents." As much as I do enjoy the happy company of kids, I don't want to reinforce the gender role that women are baby-making machines. Peruvians want to know everything immediately when they first meet me, "De donde eres? No eres china? Tienes hijos? Tienes esposo? Te casas con un peruano y te quedas?" "Where are you from? Are you not Chinese? Do you have kids? Do you have a husband? Will you marry a Peruvian and you'll stay?" And like many female Peace Corps Volunteers before me, I have an alleged boyfriend waiting for me in the States. At some point, I will probably have someone play the role just to keep the overzealous suitors at bay. Even when I tell curious inquirers that I'm already taken, they tell me I will meet one of their own and stay. Peruvians are much too charming that even I will be unable to resist. So I told the dentist that babies are alright, more than anything to reinforce the fact that my own purpose in Peru is not to meet a Peruvian and settle into life in this campo life. While I enjoy the tranquil nature of my life here, I do not see myself becoming so integrated that I will wash clothes by hand, cook with beef only when a cow has been slaughtered, and yield to the cultural clashes forever.

The room started to get loud just as the biologist said the words 'tener relaciones' or 'sex.' The little 12 y.o. boys were beside themselves, giggling with their eyes wide and turning their heads to chide each other on. "Condoms!" the boys yells in response to the biologist's questions. "How is HIV/AIDS spread?" she asks. "By going to the Anaconda!" chortle the prepubescent boys about the newly inaugurated brothel in town. The HIV/AIDS education task ahead of me proves to be quite a challenge.